

Why Fruit Trees Fail To Bear Fruit

Your fruit tree normally will begin to bear fruit soon after it has become old enough to blossom freely. The expected length of time from planting to fruit bearing varies with the type of fruit—see table below. Trees that grow at a moderate rate generally bear fruit sooner than those that grow either too quickly or too slowly. The health of your tree, its environment, fruiting habits, and the cultural practices you use can influence its ability to produce fruit. Adequate pollination is also essential to fruit yield.

Tree health – Weak or diseased trees produce poor quality fruit or no fruit at all. If not detected or controlled early enough, pest or disease problems can restrict the size and quality of the yield.

Environment – Fruit trees need full sun for best production. Avoid placing fruit trees where they will be shaded by buildings or other trees. Most hardy fruit trees need a certain amount of cold weather to end their dormancy and to promote spring growth. When winters are too mild, spring growth is delayed, irregular and slow. These factors extend the period of blooming, thereby increasing the possibility of frost injury. On the other hand extreme cold during the winter can kill the flower buds.

Fruiting Habits – Certain fruit trees such as apples can bear heavily one year and sparsely the next. This habit is called “biennial bearing.” The spring-flowering buds have actually been formed during the previous summer, so an especially heavy crop one year may prevent adequate bud formation the following year.

This is difficult to correct or alter, but you can try to induce yearly fruit production by early and heavy thinning during the year in which the trees are producing their large yield. Look at the fruit clusters when the baby fruit is dime-sized, and pick off all except the largest and best-shaped one.

Cultural Practices – It is important to thin fruit heavily the first year or two new trees flower, to keep the tree’s energy focused on growing healthy roots. A good watering and fertilizing program is essential to a tree’s vigor and fruiting capacity. Water fruit trees deeply but at infrequent intervals. Since the flower buds for the next year’s fruit are formed during the summer, summer watering will affect the next year’s fruit yield. Do not over fertilize,

Tree	Years
Apple	2 to 5
Apricot	2 to 5
Cherry, sour	3 to 5
Cherry, sweet	4 to 7
Citrus	3 to 5
Fig	2 to 3
Peach	2 to 4
Pear	4 to 6
Plum	3 to 6
Quince	5 to 6
Note: Dwarf apple and dwarf pear trees usually begin to bear 1 to 2 years earlier than standard size trees.	

especially with nitrogen, since that will force the tree to produce foliage instead of fruit. (Trees planted in lawns are vulnerable to this, as lawn fertilizer is high in nitrogen.) Reduce the competition from weeds and grass. Good pruning practices are important. Prune young fruit trees to develop a strong framework with a central leader and horizontal branches. See our Pruning Fruit Trees handout for more details.

Pollination –Without sufficient pollination, trees may blossom abundantly but will not bear fruit. Some fruit trees are self-fertile (can be pollinized with their own pollen), but many need another variety of the same fruit nearby for cross-pollination. See our fruit tree list and pollination charts for details. Figs can actually set fruit without pollination, but all other fruit trees need insects to transfer pollen between flowers (even on self-fertile trees). Cold wet weather during bloom time may reduce insect (especially honeybee) activity and decrease pollination and fruit set. Native orchard mason bees are more reliable pollinators in cool springs; you can purchase them in February, or simply encourage populations by setting up a nesting block.